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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIRUT 000221

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NSC FOR ABRAMS/DORAN/MACHESE/HARDING

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [LE](#) [SY](#) [IR](#) [SA](#)

SUBJECT: HARIRI'S ADVISOR CLAIMS BERRI NOT YET SERIOUS

REF: BEIRUT 213

Classified By: Jeffrey Feltman, Ambassador, per 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

1. (C) In a 2/10 meeting and lunch with the Ambassador, ex-MP Ghattas Khoury (accompanied by Nadar Hariri, cousin of Saad) expressed pessimism about the committee on which he serves that was set up as a result of a phone call between Saad Hariri and Nabih Berri (reftel). The March 8 representatives insisted on starting a political process with a public announcement that the everyone had agreed on a 19-11 cabinet expansion and a committee to study the Special Tribunal documents. The March 14 representatives countered that they would be willing to have a 19-10-1 cabinet in exchange for tribunal approval, not merely the formation of a study committee. The positions are so far apart that Khoury had suspended further committee work, pending a phone call or meeting between Hariri (now back in Beirut) and Berri. Khoury also discussed the March 14 decision to have a mass rally on February 14 (the anniversary of Rafiq Hariri's murder), a decision he said derived primarily from Saad Hariri's need to keep the Sunni street on his side and under control. We checked back with Khoury by phone on Sunday night, and he said that there were no developments since our Saturday meeting. Reading the tea leaves, however, he noted that Berri has taken a relatively positive position in public and press comments lately. End summary.

MARCH 8 INSISTING ON 19-11 CABINET SPLIT

2. (C) Khoury opened the meeting by saying that his March 8 counterparts on the committee set up by the 2/7 Berri-Hariri phone call were not serious about making progress. Khoury and Mohammed Samak had met Amal's Ali Hassan Khalil twice already, and Khalil was in touch with the other March 8 committee member, Hizballah's Hussein Khalil (who was not physically present at the two meetings). March 8 insists on a cabinet expansion split 19-11, giving the opposition the blocking and toppling minority, and they are willing to offer a committee to study the tribunal. Khalil told Khoury and Samak that Berri would, if asked, also provide written assurances and public declarations that the 11 ministers would not resign. Khalil proposed that Berri and Hariri make a joint announcement that the cabinet would be expanded according to the 19-11 formula and that there would be a committee to study the tribunal, with the intention that the tribunal would be approved later according to Lebanon's constitutional process. Unlike the public postures of

Hizballah and Michel Aoun, Khalil did not raise the question of early legislative elections.

MARCH 14 LEADERS WANT 19-10-1 CABINET,  
WITH TRIBUNAL APPROVAL COMING FIRST  
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13. (C) Khoury and Samak rejected this approach. With a negotiating position from March 14 leaders, they could agree to a 19-10-1 cabinet split that could be marketed as a 19-11 cabinet split publicly, as long as they had written assurances that the cabinet would function as if it were 19-10-1. But cabinet expansion would not take place until the constitutional process regarding the tribunal was completed. Rather than Berri's idea of announcing a 19-11 cabinet expansion and formation of the tribunal committee, Khoury proposed that Berri announce that the two sides have accepted both the principle of the tribunal and the principal of cabinet expansion, with further details to be announced after two committees -- one on the tribunal and one on cabinet expansion -- meet. Khalil said that he would have to get back to Khoury and called later to say that his side had rejected the idea.

14. (C) Khoury and Samak noted that March 14 leaders have no confidence that, even after the committee finished its work on the tribunal, Berri would be able to get the tribunal established. "They look at the formation of a (tribunal) committee as a concession from their side, when it's actually a huge concession for us to open up the documents," Khoury argued. Pessimistic that the committee would make progress, Khoury said that he was suspending further contact with Khalil until Hariri and Berri had the chance to meet or

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speak, to see whether Berri might offer more flexibility. As an aside, Khoury reported that PM Fouad Siniora had told him the previous evening that, were Saad to concede to a 19-11 cabinet split, he would quit the premiership.

15. (C) We checked back with Khoury on Sunday evening (2/11) by phone, and he said that there had been no further developments or contacts since our Saturday meeting. But, he noted, Berri has been making relatively positive public and press statements about the tribunal.

FEBRUARY 14 TO BE A MASS RALLY,  
IN ACKNOWLEDGMENT OF SUNNI CONCERNS  
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16. (C) Khoury also acknowledged that the March 14 leaders' decision on 2/9 to hold a mass rally on 2/14 to commemorate Rafiq Hariri on the second anniversary of his murder was based mostly on Sunni concerns. Saad Hariri has to keep in mind the feelings of the Sunni "street," Khoury said, and the Sunni street would have seen the solemn, symbolic ceremony advocated by some March 14 leaders (including the usually fiery Walid Jumblatt) as a sign of weakness. Given the Shia aggressiveness in recent weeks as demonstrated by the 1/23 demonstrations, the Sunnis insisted on a show of force on 2/14. Saad Hariri could easily lose Sunni support if he did not answer Shia demonstrations with something big on 2/14.

CONFIDENT OF CROWDS;  
HOPING TO AVOID CLASHES  
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17. (C) Khoury reported that the March 14 and March 8 movements have initiated logistics coordination, in hopes of avoiding clashes on 2/14 (when competing demonstrations will be in immediate proximity in Martyrs Square, near Hariri's tomb). He said that March 14 leaders were still pondering how to get Sunni and Druse supporters from the Biqa', south Lebanon, and the Chouf into Beirut without incident, given that they must pass through Shia villages and neighborhoods. Khoury dismissed the Ambassador's question about the other

danger to a mass rally -- that the masses may fail to materialize -- insisting that even March 14 Christians would show up in force. Noting that both the March 8 and March 14 movements have shown repeatedly that they can organize mass rallies, the Ambassador urged that the March 14 speakers also offer a positive vision for how to get out of the political crisis and for Lebanon's future.

COMMENT

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¶8. (C) It's good that the Berri-Hariri committee met twice -- Lebanese dialogue counts as progress in this atmosphere -- and it's good that Saad Hariri is at last back in Beirut. Yet our impression is that, for the next few days, nothing serious will happen locally on any of the initiatives -- Berri initiative, Moussa initiative, or Saudi-Iranian initiative -- as March 14 prepares for a mass rally on February 14. Assuming the second-year anniversary of Hariri's assassination passes without serious incident, the question is what happens thereafter. UN Special Coordinator for Lebanon Geir Pedersen and French Ambassador Bernard Emie both told the Ambassador on 2/9 that, according to their missions' Hizballah contacts, Hizballah plans some kind of action to re-take the offensive in the days after February 14. Both Pedersen and Emie found their Hizballah contacts' words ominous, in that Hizballah will not intentionally provoke violence but will respond with force if "accidents" happen. Such words may be intended, of course, to frighten, as Hizballah leaders would know that Pedersen and Emie will pass the message back to March 14 leaders. (And Emie himself is increasingly timid, captive of the force protection concerns of 1600 French UNIFIL soldiers. So Hizballah may have hoped Emie would press March 14 to cry uncle to avoid problems.) But even if they are intended only to gain concessions, Hizballah's words certainly do not suggest that the March 8 side of the dispiriting Lebanese political divide is ready for a compromise solution.

FELTMAN